

THE BALINESE COKFIGHT
- A PSYCHOANALYTICAL INVESTIGATION OF CULTURAL
ELABORATIONS -

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Abstract: Unlike an historian, an anthropologist drawing on fieldwork cannot – not even in theory – control all the available evidence and render it “truthfully.” A community is not a finite archive. Unlike a psychiatric expert, moreover, an anthropologist cannot claim to have met alone with his/ her subject – a “culture”. That is why, in order to obtain a more in-depth analysis of such a “culture”, I shall undertake, in what follows, a psycho-analytical investigation, with the “toolkit” provided by theoreticians of the field in the wake of Jacques Lacan, of Clifford Geertz’s *Deep Play. Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*.

Keywords: anthropology; psychoanalysis; cultural unconscious; cockfight.

In his introduction to the work which will mark the beginning of *ethnoscience* as a “new ethnography”¹, Steven Tyler launched the following question: “Is this “new approach” a genuinely valid reformulation or is it no more than a short-lived fad and a coul de sac?” Three decades later, Dan Sperber² ushers in the reinforcing buttresses, bridging the gap between ethnography and scientifically legitimised canons of appraisal: “Explaining culture means explaining why certain representations are more widely distributed: a science of culture must be a sort of epidemiology of representations. It must provide explanations as to the reason why certain representations appear to be more successful, more ‘contagious’ than others.”

¹ Stephen Tyler: *Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to the Occult Document*, in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

² Quoted in Bernard Juillerat: *Penser l’imaginaire. Essai d’anthropologie psychanalytique*, Paris : Editions Payot Lausanne, 2001, p. 143.

Moreover, many ethnologists had the opportunity of finding what could be called “key symbols”, fundamental representations whose recurrence in various dissimilar cultures raises the question of “universals”.

The presupposition underlying all is that the description proper of a culture must needs start with the empirical reality whereof it elaborates models that account for the subjacent reality, the mental, nay unconscious one. This is where psychoanalysis steps in, since it is well equipped for a helpful retrieval and identification of the unconscious processes shared by the individuals of a society, as well as their translation into cultural symbols shared by everybody. The levels of phantasmatic formation are closely connected, and cultures reproduce, in a symbolically elaborated manner, these primordial and universal representations.

Starting from this observation, my analysis will attempt a debate on two issues: the first one is related to the transformational processes, the “mediations” which permit the metamorphosis of unconscious, individual images into motifs elaborated by the collective imaginary. The second one will broach the theoretical “threshold” separating the layer of universals from the unlimited space of cultural diversity, with a focus on Clifford Geertz’s famous account of an indigenous ritual, the Balinese cockfight. Its relevance for the aim of my undertaking is made obvious by the ethnographer himself:

“[...] It is at least as important a revelation of what being a Balinese is really like, as more celebrated phenomena. As much of America surfaces in a ball park, on a golf links, at a race track, or around a poker table, much of Bali surfaces in a cock ring. To any one who has been in Bali any length of time, *the deep psychological identification* (emphasis added) of Balinese men with their cocks is unmistakable. *For it is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men.* (emphasis added)”³.

The basic argument I make is that the cockfight conceals the image of an infraworld, which is the domain of the repressed, of an unconscious in permanent communication with the social.

Since the elaboration of anthropological postulates is increasingly *arbitrary* – despite the fact (or maybe all the more reason why) that they rely on empirical data to upholster the theoretical discourse – the task of the psychoanalyst becomes equally difficult, given this questioning of the objectivity of the observing subject (the ethnologist). The fact is that anthropology, in contemporary times, is distrustful of any demonstration, of any model, of any linguistic rigidity even, and thus reopens the definitional procedure of the signification of

³ Clifford Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, Chapter 1, p. 417

terms such as: “society”, “culture”, “representation”, “symbol”, rejecting, consequently, the possibility of a “sufficient objectivity”⁴ on the part of the researcher.

In Geertz’s *Balinese cockfight*, though not immediately obvious, since it is camouflaged under a misleading omniscience, the ethnographer’s early alienation from the Balinese, his confused “non-person” status, is transformed by the appealing fable of the police raid with its show of complicity:

“We were intruders, professional ones, and villagers dealt with us as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their life, who yet press themselves upon them: as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were non-persons, spectres, invisible men”⁵.

The anecdote establishes a presumption of connectedness, which permits the writer to function in his subsequent analysis as an omnipresent, knowledgeable exegete and spokesman. The interpreter situates the ritual sport as a text in a contextual world and brilliantly “reads” its cultural meanings. Then Geertz abruptly disappears into his rapport – we have here the quasi-invisibility of participant-observation the author is talking face to face with particular Balinese rather than reading culture “over their shoulders”⁶.

With reference to psycho-analysis, the notion of dialogism is to be set in parallel with the counterpart observer/ observed relation in ethnography. Gilbert Herdt⁷ even makes a proposal for a “clinical ethnography” (1990) where it is the analysis of individuals on field that is liable to permit access to the very core of culture, and where the investigator should integrate in his results his own position as a participant subject.

The anthropological work, Assoun contends⁸, should not reduce societies to a single model, but valorise the richness of their particular, idiosyncratic creativities, underlined by fundamental schemes which act in an organising manner.

If Freud remains the incontestable founder of psycho-analysis, the latter has undergone in recent years multiple “ad-justments”, and certain concepts, such as that of “unconscious”, have been continually redefined function of the post- Freudian theories which have been put forth. In fact, the Freudian concept of the unconscious, could not – Juillerat argues – have an application in anthropology, since its constitutive element is repression (in its turn, “originary” or “subsequent”).

⁴ The term is employed in Paul-Laurent Assoun & Markos Zafiroopoulos: *L’Anthropologie psychanalytique*, Paris: Economica, 2002, p. 45

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, pp. 402-417

⁶ Geertz, p. 452

⁷ Mentioned by Elissalde, Yvan: *Critique de l’interprétation*/ Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2000, p. 50

⁸ Paul-Laurent Assoun & Markos Zafiroopoulos: *L’Anthropologie psychanalytique*, p. 21

The relationship that repression holds with oblivion, in which “the return of the repressed” would signify nothing more than the resurfacing of something forgotten is ambiguous and, consequently, with scarce chances of being any good.

The need was felt, therefore, for an enlarging and a diversifying of the definitions on the unconscious, since the term proved to be potentially too “narrowly”-conceived to contain all the mental processes involved in the non-conscious. The biologist Henry Atlan⁹, for example, wrote that “the unconscious will (...) is the first phenomenon which characterises our organisation both structurally and functionally”, the repressive processes being only secondary.

If for Jacques Lacan the unconscious was “structured as a language”, post-structuralist representatives of psychoanalysis, such as Didier Anzieu make a decisive swerve back to corporeality.

Here’s how Anzieu himself states his approach: “I attach a great deal of importance to the body, to the biological root of psychic life, to the relations between the psychic *Moi* and the corporeal *Moi*, to their limits and to the latter’s fluctuations and to all the material of primary sensations which will be articulated, subsequently, to the drives, and will organise themselves into phantasms and conflicts”¹⁰.

The unconscious, regardless of its definitional framework, is fundamental in the cultural elaboration. It appears in close connection (and opposition) with the conscious. As announced in the early proceedings of my analysis, the Balinese ritual is not merely a shallow, convulsive surge of animal hatred, it goes deeper than that: “Balinese see in fighting cocks – themselves, their social order, abstract hatred, masculinity, demonic power”¹¹, and secondarily, but not less importantly: “[T]hey also see the *archetype* of status virtue, the arrogant, resolute, honour-mad player with real fire”¹². Whereof, the feeling of “disquietfulness” attending it, which does not seem at all unnatural:

“The disquietfulness arises, ‘somehow,’ out of a conjunction of three attributes of the fight: its immediate dramatic shape; its metaphoric content; and its social context. The reason that it is disquietful is that, joining pride to selfhood, selfhood to cocks, and cocks to destruction, it brings to imaginative realization a dimension of Balinese experience normally well-observed from view”¹³.

⁹ Mentioned in Paul-Laurent Assoun & Markos Zafiroopoulos: *L’Anthropologie psychanalytique*, p. 52

¹⁰ Didier Anzieu: *Une peau pour les pensées*, Paris, Editions Clancier-Guenaud, 1986, p. 48 (translation mine)

¹¹ Clifford Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, pp. 442

¹² Idem.

¹³ Geertz, p. 444

The uneasiness accompanies, therefore, the spectacle of a repressed reality which quits its recesses and steps to the foreground. The unnerving and unsettling quality of this “mock war of selves” translates, moreover, the unsettling quality of the unconscious itself, which is “played out”, by transfer, under the guise, and through the mediation of this cultural formation.

In acting as a mirror for the unknown within, the cockfight is both “symmetrical” to the reflected image (an invisible one, which is allowed visibility) and reversed, at the same time, as any mirror reflection, undergoing consequently a process of *lateralisation* – as Gerard Pommier calls it:

“The lateralisation of the human being is imposed with necessity, because the relation between the image and the mirror is necessarily reversed, and because this image constitutes our “true” psychical body, firstly alienated in the Other. In the act we perform with a view to appropriating this body, we must submit to the constraints of this symmetry and as a result, we become ourselves lateralised. Our body will be, therefore, “psychically” divided by the repression, cleft in the aftermath of the spatial organisation involved in it”¹⁴.

In other words, the Balinese doesn’t *find* himself in this mirror, rather, he *discovers* himself:

“In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society’s temper at the same time”¹⁵ – whereof the disquieting feeling which accompanies the playing-out of his “inside”, which inherently preserves the strange imprint of the repressed signification. The idea is implicit in the attributes Clifford Geertz ascribes to cocks engaged in the fight. They are “surrogates of their owners’ personalities”, “animal mirrors of psychic form”.

The repression follows a trajectory which ends in reversal, in “lateralisation”: the “inside” can be successfully forced into the “outside” with the provision that the “inside” has a repressed status. Once the repressed reality is forced into resurfacing, the expectations that someone must make good on the promise of visibility and of translation, could be met with even in an oblique manner: by assigning it a warm, camouflaged “underneath” to the “outside”, away from immediate recognition:

“In the normal course of things, the Balinese are shy to the point of obsessiveness of open conflict. Oblique, cautious, subdued, masters of indirection and dissimulation, [...] they

¹⁴ Gerard Pommier: *Naissance et renaissance de l’écriture*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, pp. 330-331

¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, p. 451

rarely face what they can turn away from, rarely resist what they can evade. But here they portray themselves as wild and murderous, with manic explosions of instinctual cruelty. A powerful rendering of life as the Balinese most deeply do not want it is set in the context of a sample of it as they do in fact have it”¹⁶.

And still: “The slaughter in the cock ring is not a depiction of how things literally are among men, but, what is almost worse, of how, from a particular angle, they imaginatively are”¹⁷.

The subject gains nothing from appropriating what s/he rejects and represses, yet it is this nothing that will turn into the good awaiting at the end of this void operation, which, moreover, ensures his/ her psychic survival.

Didier Anzieu argues that the liberation of desire, savage by nature, is a dangerous act, to the point of jeopardizing the very life of the subject. Geertz joins in: “Every people, the proverb has it, loves its own form of violence. The cockfight is the Balinese reflection on theirs”¹⁸.

Anzieu’s reservations with regard to the liberation of the repressed desire may be said to have been confirmed. In the last footnote to his text, Geertz mentions an upheaval in Bali, in December 1965, during which eighty thousand Balinese were killed, largely by one another. He comments on this incident:

“This is not to say, of course, that the killings were caused by the cockfight, could have been predicted on the basis of it, or were some sort of enlarged version of it with real people in the place of cocks. It is merely to say that if one looks at Bali through the medium of its cockfight, the fact that the massacre occurred seems less like a contradiction to the laws of nature. Sometimes people actually get life precisely as they most deeply do not want it”¹⁹.

The cockfight gives vent in a vicarious and thus, harmless manner, to repressed desires which, if actualised, would result in a bloodbath. It is, consequently, a reflection of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented, a sensibility which is transferentially played out, enacted and thus rendered harmful. We witness how the environment assumes, surprisingly, a function of defence.

One cannot help but notice, in Geertz’s cockfight, the close connection between Balinese men and their cocks, which become, thus, almost extensions of their owners’

¹⁶ Geertz, p. 416

¹⁷ Idem.

¹⁸ Geertz, p. 449

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, p. 452

personality. Moreover, as he remarks, they often refer to the cocks in terms of “I fought So-and-So”²⁰:

“But the intimacy of men with their cocks is more than metaphorical. Balinese men [...] spent an enormous amount of time with their favourites, grooming them, feeding them, discussing them, trying them out against one another, or just gazing at them with a mixture of rapt admiration and dreamy self-absorption”²¹.

Contextualizing Anzieu’s theorems, the cock is deemed to functioning as a prosthesis of its owner’s imago is transferentially assigned the role of saving the integrity of it.

The responsibility may prove, nevertheless, a little too difficult, since the fighting cocks have spurs attached to their legs, in order to “hack each other to pieces”²². We can understand why the Balinese are so intent on preserving the bodily integrity of their cocks, preventing, as much as possible, the blood drainage:

“During this interval, the handler of the wounded cock has been working frantically over it. [...] He blows in its mouth, putting the whole chicken head in his own mouth and sucking and blowing [...] By the time he is forced to put it back down, he is usually drenched in chicken blood”²³.

The puncturing, the tearing of the bodily envelope gets unconsciously associated with an impossibility of “containing” the psychical processes, which henceforth are perceived as disseminated. Breaching the container involves, consequently, its inevitable malfunctioning and, implicitly, the impossibility of keeping up the barrier it raised against the outside. The spur attached to the opponent’s leg becomes a marker of a potential aggressiveness on the part of the other, liable to rip apart one’s psychical envelope, which would jeopardise one’s inner coherence, the very continuity of one’s self.

Such an act of aggressiveness would be, in Geertz’s terms, an instantiation of the “powers of darkness”, or of that “lumber room” which, for Lacan, designated the unconscious: “In identifying with his cock, the Balinese man is identifying with what he most fears, hates – ‘The Powers of Darkness’”²⁴ – a reality which remains concealed, namely the reality of the *psyche*, with its array of representations and unconscious desires.

²⁰ Geertz, p. 422

²¹ Geertz, p. 419

²² Geertz, p. 422

²³ Geertz, p. 423

²⁴ Geertz, p. 420

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